The Dangers of Literacy

Millions of readers create a market for mediocrity.

By Albert Jay Nock

NOT LONG AGO I looked over a library said to contain a copy of every book published in America down to the year 1800. It bore witness that in those days reading was a fairly serious business; I could find nothing resembling what we should call popular literature on the shelves. The inference was that literacy was not general and that those who read did so for other purposes than mere pastime, purposes that were pretty strictly non-sensational; and there is every collateral evidence that such was the case.

Thomas Jefferson laid great stress on literacy as an indispensable asset to good citizenship and sound patriotism. He was all for having everybody become literate, and those who have examined his own library (it is preserved intact in the Library of Congress) may easily see why. *Mutatis mutandis*, if everybody read the kind of thing he did, and as he did, he would have been right. But in his laudable wish to make the benefits of literacy accessible to all, Mr. Jefferson did not see that he had the operation of two natural laws dead against him. He seems to have jumped to the conclusion that, because certain qualified persons got a definite benefit out of literacy, anybody could get the same benefit on the same terms; and here he collided with the law of diminishing returns. He seems also to have imagined that a general indiscriminate literacy would be compatible with keeping up something like the proportion that he saw existing between good literature and bad; and here the great and good old man ran hard aground on Gresham's law.

Gresham's law has to do with the nature of currency, and the common formula for it is that "bad money drives out good." That is to say, it is always the worst form of currency in circulation that fixes the value of all the others and causes them presently to disappear. Gresham's law usually comes into play whenever a government undertakes to settle a bill for its misfeasances by the larcenous expedient of "managing" its currency; hence of late years this law has been very busy with the currency of many countries.

I spent some time last year in Portugal, where the status of literacy and the conditions of the book-market are about what they were in Mr. Jefferson's America. One saw very little "popular literature" on sale but an astonishingly large assortment of the better kind. I made my observations at the right moment, apparently, because, like all good modern republicans, the Portuguese have lately become infected with Mr. Jefferson's ideas about literacy and are trying to have everybody taught to read and write; and it interested me to see that they are setting about this quite in our own incurious, hand-over-head fashion, without betraying the faintest notion that anything like a natural law may be a factor in the situation.

Doubtless what has happened elsewhere will happen there. In the first place, the Portuguese are likely to discover that, while no illiterate person can read, it is a mere *non distributio medii* to conclude that any literate person can read. The fact is that relatively few literate persons can read; the proportion appears to be quite small. I do not mean to say that the majority are unable to read intelligently; I mean that they are unable to read at all—unable, that is, to gather from a printed paragraph anything like a correct idea of its content. They can pretty regularly make out the meaning of printed matter which is addressed to mere sensation, like newsmatter, statistics, or perhaps an "informative" editorial or article, provided it be dosed out in very short sentences and three-line paragraphs; but this is not reading, and the ability to do it but barely implies the exercise of any faculty that could be called distinctively human. One can almost imagine an intelligent anthropoid trained to do it about as well and to about as good purpose; in fact, I once heard of a horse that was trained to do it in a small way. Reading, as distinguished from this kind of proficiency, implies a use of the reflective faculty, and not many persons

have this faculty. According to the newspapers, Mr. Butler, the president of Columbia University, was complaining the other day that the practice of reflective thought had pretty well ceased among us. There is much to be said on this topic, but it is enough to remark here that literacy will not do duty for the power of reflective thought where such does not exist, nor does a state of literacy presuppose its existence.

The average literate person being devoid of reflective power but capable of sensation, his literacy creates a demand for a large volume of printed matter addressed to sensation; and this form of literature, being the worst in circulation, fixes the value of all the rest and tends to drive it out. In this country, for example, it has been interesting to see the reluctant and gradual submission of some of our few "serious" publications to this inevitable fixing of value. They have brought their aim continually closer to the aim of journalism, addressing themselves more and more to sensation, less and less to reflection, until now their policy favors almost exclusively the kind of thing one would naturally look for in an enterprising Sunday newspaper. Only the other day I came across a market- letter put out by a firm of literary agents, and I observed with interest that "the serious essay, travel, foreign-affairs type of article is unlikely to find a good market, unless by a well-known name."

I had occasion lately to look up something that one of our "quality" magazines published in 1874, and as I went through the two bound volumes I noticed the relative space they gave to material addressed to the power of reflective thought. For curiosity I made a comparison with last year's issues of the same magazine; and I can not suggest a more convincing exercise for any person who doubts the validity of Gresham's law in the premises, nor can I suggest a more substantial basis for generalization.

Gresham's law has, in fact, done far more than revolutionize publishing; it has set up a brand-new business. In the face of this fact, which seems none too well understood, we see publishers and authors occasionally showing something of the splendid intrepidity that one admires in the leader of a forlorn hope, and one thinks of them as perhaps the most public-spirited of all created beings.

Our idea of mass education does vast credit to our intentions; like perpetual motion, the thing would be fine if it would work, but the mischief of it is to keep it from colliding with natural law. As results stand now, a graduating class of two, three, or five hundred persons is practically nothing but a tableau display of what the law of diminishing returns can do when it tries. Again, the promotion of mass literacy is a noble experiment, but apparently there is no way to accommodate our idea of it to the insidious action of Gresham's law. With regard to these and all other aspects of our equalitarian social theory, my only aim is the humble one of suggesting that we bear in mind the disregard that nature has for unintelligent good intentions and the vixenish severity with which she treats them. ■

Albert Jay Nock (1873-1945) was editor of The Freeman *and author of* Memoirs of a Superfluous Man, *among many others. This essay is taken from "The Gods' Lookout," February 1934.*

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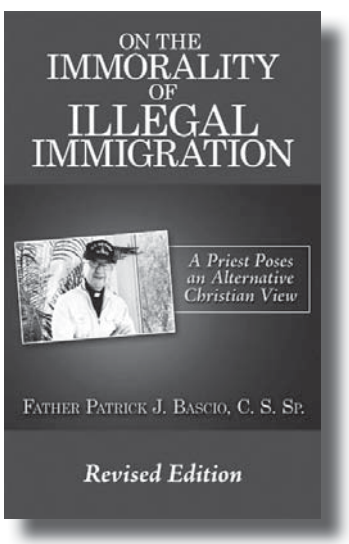

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